

A photograph of Fred Phaswana, a South African politician, speaking into a microphone. He is wearing a dark suit, a white shirt, and a red tie. The background is a plain, light-colored wall. The text is overlaid on the image.

# Strategic choices for South Africa's leadership in 2020

South Africa is a significant actor in Africa. Fred Phaswana says there is an opportunity for South Africa to put into practice its desire to reclaim its prestige and credibility on the continent

In February, President Cyril Ramaphosa became the chairman of the African Union (AU) for a year, as well as the chairman of the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) until the end of 2021. These roles also coincide with South Africa's second year as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (its third such stint since 2007).

The last time South Africa chaired the AU was 2002 when the new body, the successor of the Organisation of African Unity, was launched in Durban. Then, President Mbeki had declared that:

*"The time has come that Africa must take her rightful place in global affairs ... The time has come to end the marginalisation of Africa."*

The AU was a different organisation from the OAU, reflecting the needs of the new century – focusing on Africa's development path through the establishment of the New Partnership for Africa's Development and on good governance through the African Peer Review Mechanism. Eighteen years later, Africa as a whole displays much greater agency in terms of determining its future and engaging in global affairs.

NEPAD has become the AU Development Agency and the APRM Secretariat has received new impetus. Furthermore, the continent is to embark on an ambitious continental free trade area just at a time when some parts of the world are closing their borders.

This confluence of chairmanships provides an opportunity for South Africa to put into practice its desire to reclaim its prestige and credibility on the continent. No matter the domestic challenges the country faces, it is still a significant actor in Africa. But what can the country achieve in the short tenures available?

In 2018, President Paul Kagame of Rwanda demonstrated that a state can make the most of its time in the AU chair, by relentlessly driving AU reform and the African Continental Free Trade Agreement through strong leadership.

There are three areas that the President highlighted when he took over the chairmanship, and where progress in each would make a significant impact on the continent. The first and perhaps most challenging is 'Silencing the Guns'; the second is the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement; and the third is improving governance in Africa through the APRM.

*The country has always emphasised that without good governance in Africa, there cannot be real peace or prosperity*

## **No shortage of guns to silence**

East Africa and the Horn have seen the rise of extremist attacks in Kenya, which have spilled over to Tanzania and northern Mozambique. There is a complex web of interlocking conflicts across the Sahel, and instability continues in the Central African Republic, Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo. *Africa Confidential* recently wrote that conflict in 13 African countries affects some 25 million people, retarding economic growth and regional integration. The report states that ‘five sprawling conflicts and crises – in Ethiopia, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan and South Sudan – have forced over 10 million people to flee their homes’.

The nexus between peace and development has long been a strong theme in democratic South Africa’s foreign policy. The country has played a seminal role in attempting to resolve complex conflicts across the continent and has also championed peace-making, stronger AU-UN relations and women, peace and security during its current tenure on the UN Security Council.

Ramaphosa specifically mentioned the conflicts in Libya and South Sudan attributing ‘ulterior motives’ to interventions by non-African states. Libya’s nine-year civil war has been internationalised, with Russia, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey all involved, including through supplying weaponised drones to their proxies. Africa’s newest state, South Sudan, remains wracked by warring political factions.

South Africa as the AU chair this year should propel the organisation from the margins to the centre of conflict resolution in cases like Libya and South Sudan. In doing so, South Africa will have to take on the external actors helping to fuel the conflict, including ones which are allies and friends of our country. It will take the deployment of diplomats, mediators, and South Africa’s skills in building consensus through diplomatic means.

## **Keeping to the free trade agreement timetable**

The second critical area for South Africa will be the economic integration of Africa, a long-held Pan-Africanist dream, of which the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA), due to come into operation in July this year, is the high point.

According to estimates from the UN Economic Commission for Africa, the agreement could improve intra-African trade by 52.3% by doing away with import duties, and double this if there is also the reduction of non-tariff barriers. The growth and economic development the agreement can generate are crucial to tackle poverty and inequality and the resultant political and social instability.

South Africa must ensure that the AU keeps to its timetable to begin trading under the AfCFTA on 1 July 2020. This will entail closely monitoring and encouraging the various ongoing negotiations. The first priority is finalising the rules of origin and tariff schedules. The second is to ensure that the remaining countries that still need to deposit their instruments with the AU, do so during 2020, and relatedly, that all countries implement it.

The country lobbied hard – and successfully – at the AU for South African Wamkele Mene to be elected as Secretary General of the AfCFTA, which will be headquartered in Accra, Ghana. Securing the election of Mr Mene was a vital element to ensure that the Secretariat was led by a technically competent individual and was not overtly politicised.

However, South Africa needs to balance its engagement carefully and not overplay its hand; after all we are among those that stand to benefit the most, and sensitivity to that is necessary to ensure that there is no backlash against our business or the agreement in general. Which is why it is also important to finalise compensation mechanisms for those countries that stand to lose out.

The experience and resources of the National Treasury and Department of Trade and Industry would be of immense value in supporting the president's efforts. It also ties in well with his natural strengths and domestic priorities of attracting investments and turning the sluggish South African economy around. He could also work hard to bring South African business fully on board.

### **Sharpening governance**

On the governance front, South Africa was a critical player in conceptualising and creating the APRM, the continent's main governance promotion and monitoring instrument. South Africa houses the APRM Secretariat and has invested heavily in supporting the system. The South African government contributed \$10,7 million to the APRM between 2004 and 2018. The APRM's total income in this period from member states was \$48.8 million.

It now has a chance to get a return on its investment and provide visionary political leadership once again to promote good governance, at home and abroad, especially since South Africa is due to undertake its second APRM review. The last review had little effect. We need to do better this time. Doing so will also provide an example to the rest of the continent.

The country has always emphasised that without good governance in Africa, there cannot be real peace or prosperity. Elevating governance, therefore, is a critical component of silencing the guns. But for the APRM to be successful the 'peer' forum has to be frank and honest with the outcomes of the peer review processes. They should not let leaders off the hook, when reports identify serious governance challenges. President Ramaphosa can inject a new dynamism and accountability into these discussions.

These are all significant undertakings and South Africa cannot achieve them on its own, especially given its current domestic challenges. It needs to work with strong partners inside and outside Africa.

The country's past ability to bring people together and build bridges to solutions must be a significant tool in its armoury, illustrating its credentials as a reliable, credible and capable leader in Africa and partner with external actors who share a commitment to diplomacy and effective multilateralism. ■

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